

When by ej_writer

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Summary:

Steve teaches Billy to play the piano.

1. Music makes us real

Growing up in the Harrington's mansion, there was a beautiful grand piano in the upstairs salon, deep mahogany with gold trim to contrast meticulously polished ivory keys.

Steve's parents would let him play it whenever he wanted, ignoring the off key banging on the keys until he was old enough to do it right, and eventually, when he'd proven to be somewhat proficient in the skill with nothing but his own messing around and a few stray pieces of sheet music to go by, he'd been signed up for professional lessons.

Every other weekday at four o'clock, he met with an instructor, a strict woman about his mother's age, to be taught discipline and control. How to channel himself into an outlet and use his hands to make something beautiful, melodic, *powerful*.

It was being able to use what he'd learned to create that got him through some of the hardest moments of his life. His frustrations and his fear and his pain were just between him and the ivories, pouring out through gentle musicianship rather than a more destructive habit he might've favored without the skill.

So when Billy Hargrove, permanently hooked up to an oxygen tank and in a back brace, gets out of the hospital and moves into Steve's place without the motivation or the trust in his own body to do much of anything, Steve thinks about his lessons. About all he learned about himself when he got to just sit and create, and he decides to share that with Billy.

He doesn't take to it very well at first. When Steve went to play, Billy would just sit on the bench beside him while he did his thing, his hands shoved in his hoodie pocket and not paying him a smidgen of attention. That's okay with Steve, he gets it.

The circumstances that landed the two of them in one place were strange enough, doctors orders were to keep him out of the abusive situation he'd have been in had he gone back to his own home, and governmental orders were for him to stay with someone aware of the

conspiracy that got him hurt in the first place. So Steve didn't exactly expect him to be open to the idea of playing the piano, and especially not with as many ailments as he suffered through.

When Billy was in the hospital, the nerve damage to his chest combined with fibromyalgia setting in after one too many surgeries had been so severe he hadn't been able to even raise his arms or close his fingers to make a fist. Even still his mobility was rather limited.

Steve got it if he didn't want to hurt himself, so he gave him his space, hoping that through observation alone of Steve's playing he could feel that soothing of the melody that he had so often chased when he wasn't feeling his best.

Overtime, Billy becomes more interested, his tired gaze attentively following every last movement of Steve's thin fingers across the keys. Steve feels himself get more showy, just the tiniest bit more dramatic in his movements because he knows Billy's paying attention now.

One day, after Steve finishes out the melody of a song he knew by heart from those long days in his lessons, he turns to look at Billy, to see what he thought.

Billy's already looking at him, and he clears his throat and says in a voice that's scratchy and quiet, "What song was that?"

It's the first time Steve's heard him speak since he'd been discharged, even in the hospital he'd only ever talked to his sister in whispers for nobody's ears but hers.

She told Steve not too long after Billy had moved in that he had been too scared to talk, in part because of the chemical burns in his throat, but mainly because he was scared of himself. Of what his body had been used to do.

Steve stumbles over his words, shocked to hear Billy break his vow of silence. "It's uh- it's Rainy Days and Mondays."

Billy clears his throat again, takes his hands out of his pocket and says, in a voice determined and strong as it can get, "I wanna play that."

It takes a long, long time of practice, with Billy's hands shaking the way they do from the effort, and with Steve being a less than perfect instructor, teaching solely from the knowledge he'd acquired when he was 8, but he gets there, slowly.

They sit at that grand piano for hours on end, working through scales and trying to get Billy to remember the keys, doing warmup after warmup as Steve did his best to drill the fundamentals of playing piano into Billy's mind to make this a little easier.

It doesn't go horribly, he's good considering what they have to work with, but Billy gets frustrated *very* easily.

When his hands just won't do what he wants them to, he loses his confidence entirely. Steve tries to remind him over and over that he's just starting and that musicianship is a difficult skill to pick up, even more so at 19 years old with no experience and a former prodigy as his teacher. But Billy is too in his own head, he equates the difficulty of playing with being unable.

It makes him feel stupid for ever even trying, for thinking he could be more than his injuries, so he gives it up. Goes back to just brooding on the bench with his hood drawn up, pretending like he doesn't care.

Steve knows that he's not going to let him give it up. Not when he saw how Billy's eyes would light up in a way they hadn't since before he got hurt every time he'd play a progression, or even just a trill. This was far too important to let him be discouraged.

The solution he finds is to show Billy something he already can do instead of jumping straight into teaching him new things, and that something is dueting Julie Andrews' Do-Re-Mi back and forth with him.

It starts like this. Steve plays through it first, starting with doe a deer and coming back 'round to do, and asks Billy when he's through with

it, "Do you want to try?"

Billy doesn't even look at him, just slouches his posture as much as is possible with a sheet of plastic strapped to his back to keep him sitting upright, and shakes his head no. His dejection only makes Steve more determined to get him to do this.

So he plays it for him again, just a hair slower than the first time, and watches Billy's face instead of the keys while he plays. This time through Billy's trying too hard to look like he's not watching, so Steve plays through it again.

Steve looks over at him expectantly, and Billy looks like he's thinking hard about something, worrying his lip between his teeth, until he lets out a shaky breath and shifts forward on the bench, resting unsteady hands below bass F and treble C until he has the courage to move them.

Delighted at his attempt, Steve sings the words for him so he has something to keep up with, keeping his voice soft while Billy stumbles his way through the notes.

For a first attempt without sheet music, it's not terrible, and he can tell from the way Billy's cheeks flush that he doesn't think so either. Steve offers him a smile that he hopes is encouraging, and starts his turn again.

That becomes their thing to get Billy back into playing. Everyday they sat down on the bench and bounced back and forth playing through Do-Re-Mi as many times as it took for Billy's confidence to be up, and for him to give Steve the okay to try to teach him something new.

He learns how to play Rainy Days and Mondays and a handful of other songs, and though he still has trouble with certain things, like keeping his wrists too tense and never getting sharp notes quite right, fumbling with straddles and playing much slower than Steve could, his confidence is up, and he understands that feeling Steve described.

That liberation of being able to make something with hands that had

destroyed, that had hurt and taken away, and he feels free of it, not just when he plays. He's lost in the good of the music so as not to dwell on the bad.

Billy sings on his own for the first time a year in, his voice still strained ever so slightly as he carries the tune by himself. It's unexpected, and though it's a silly thing to get emotional over, Billy singing Julie Andrews off-key, Steve would be lying if he said he didn't tear up just a little.

It's Billy's turn to try to gauge Steve's reaction, a shy smile playing at his lips as he eyes the look on Steve's face, the shock he finds there and the tears welling in his eyes.

High on the courage it took to let his guard down and sing, he takes another chance and leans over on the bench, and presses his lips to Steve's. Captures the words unspoken in a kiss that is in every part as beautiful, melodic, *powerful*, as the music they make together.

Steve taught Billy to play the piano, but he also showed him how to cope, how to forgive, how to feel. More than anything, Steve taught Billy how to love.

2. What we are is what we play

Summary for the Chapter:

What Billy does with music.

Notes for the Chapter:

This work takes inspiration from two songs, Abe Burrows' "When" and Jim Croce's "Time in a Bottle." Give either a listen to get the feeling I was trying to portray here and see what Billy was playing.

When they finally make the leap out of Hawkins, they move into a one story in Oregon, of all places. It's not California, but it's close by, and the doctors say that for the sake of Billy's lungs, he needs a more mild climate than he'd have there. Besides, Billy insists that anyplace is home enough for him as long as Steve's with him.

After a few months of living there with a nagging sense that something was missing from the space, they're able to complete their new home when they find an upright piano for next to nothing on the side of the road to replace the old grand they had to leave behind at Steve's parents place.

It's much less sophisticated than what they're accustomed to, the finish had long ago chipped off and half of the yellowed keys played the wrong notes, but they're able to fix it up with some work.

Once it's presentable, shined up and once again functioning properly, it sits like a trophy in the corner of their dining room, a symbol of what they could do with music. That graceful ability to grow and to change and to heal that they were so familiar with, and of the love that developed between them on the bench.

Billy plays more than Steve does, to keep himself occupied when he's on his own and itching to get out there and break every rule of his recovery laid down by his doctors.

Even after he regains most of his strength, his hands no longer shaking from the simplest of tasks, the piano never loses its power to keep him out of his thoughts, chasing away nightmares and rampant fears so he can feel like himself.

The sounds of Billy's playing carrying through their houses, the soft twinkling of keys as the first rays of sunshine cut through curtained windows is like an alarm clock, has Steve waking up in a bliss each morning.

Even in the winter, when the cold is especially hard on Billy's body, his scars sore like they're still new and his joints stiff and aching, he's guaranteed to be up to play at the first rays of the morning sun, usually before Steve is even up for work.

One particularly snowy morning, when Steve wakes up to the usual melody of Billy's playing with the sun in his eyes, he takes a moment to just stay in bed and revel in the warm music drifting in the room before he realizes he's slept through his alarm.

He panics for a moment, shoves his glasses onto his face crooked and stumbles out of the bed fast enough he almost trips over the comforters still wrapped around him, but in his effort to stay upright he notices a note on the nightstand.

In Billy's scratchy handwriting it reads, "School's cancelled. Thought I'd let you sleep in -B"

Steve chuckles to himself over the mix-up, and peeks out the window past thick curtains to see a few inches of snow that wasn't there when they'd gone to bed the night before. He's not one to say he hates his job, or even dislikes it, teaching is what he'd always wanted to do, but a thousand times over he'd rather be given the chance to stay at home with Billy.

Without bothering to change out of his pajamas, he pads down the hall into the kitchen, focusing on the song drifting in from the dining room, one he doesn't think he recognizes, as he starts to make their morning white tea.

Billy would've rather it be a morning coffee, but that much caffeine is bad for his heart, so they settle for tea with honey and a pinch of sugar.

"Mornin', Stevie." Without looking up, he acknowledges Steve as he enters with two steaming mugs. "Did you get my note?"

"Wouldn't I be out the door by now if I hadn't?" Steve sets their teas on the corner of the dining table to cool, and sits down so he's straddling the bench. He situates himself so he can wrap his arms loosely around Billy's braced torso, and rest his cheek against his shoulder so he can watch scarred hands as they glide across the keys.

Billy chuckles, smiles down at the keys. "Touché."

Once he's settled, Steve sighs through his nose and asks, "What's that you're playin'?"

"S'a song called When." This tip of Billy's tongue pokes out just between his teeth, his concentration on what he's playing intense. He acknowledges Steve again when he reaches a slower part of the song. "You wanna hear it?"

An answer isn't really necessary, Billy knows undoubtedly that Steve is interested in anything he does, but he gives a confirmation regardless. "You know I do." He shifts until he's comfortable against Billy's side, and Billy starts into the song.

His voice is much better than before, now that his throat is healed. It's still a little gravelly, gets deeper when he sings where Steve's gets higher, but it's smooth and warm and just about Steve's favorite sound in the whole world.

Closing his eyes, Steve focuses on just listening to the magical sounds that Billy can make, on feeling the soothing vibrations of his voice as he works through the piece.

With words the song is vaguely familiar, and it's truly a beautiful thing.

It's a ballad to nature, ironic for someone who spends most of his day confined to indoors or his own backyard. The song is gentle, full of pretty trills to accentuate even prettier lyrics, but it takes on a

melancholy tone, given the context.

Appreciation for life, for the world and everything good within it is something anyone can relate to, but apply it to a sick man and it changes the meaning drastically. Gives it more a sense of longing for these things, and it's got Steve feeling overwhelmed by its sincerity.

Typically, Billy favored songs he thought were fun like The Bitch is Back and piano covers of songs far too hard core for the dainty instrument, so it's surprising, hearing him pouring his heart out through an actual ballad, but Steve is glad for it, that fond and warm feeling growing in his chest at hearing Billy's song.

The song trills one more time into a slow crescendo, and finishes off in a way that Steve couldn't have been expecting with the words, ““When the whole world is filled, with Mother Nature's noises... that's the time to stuff cotton in your ears!”

The change of tone in the song is so abrupt it makes Steve open his eyes again and pull away from his hold around Billy's waist, keeping his fingers linked but leaning way back to look at his face. Billy'd duped him, had him feeling all emotional before revealing his cards, his normal sense of humor.

He's wearing a smile, crooked and relaxed as he takes in Steve's reaction, the confusion at the pace change. Despite the humor twinkling in his eyes, he asks innocently, “What?”

“Nothing.” Steve can't help but smile back, even if he shakes his head at Billy's choice of song.

Still smiling, Billy kisses him, soft and slow in a way that has always made Steve feel like it was the first time, his heart doing backflips while he melts into the bench.

They pull away for a breath, and the moment passes bittersweet, just as many do these days. Giggle almost always turn to tears anymore, and Steve feels his lip start to tremble, feels Billy put a hand on the small of his back so he can pull him closer and sigh into his hair.

Billy's dying.

The doctors say he's only got a few years left in him, if that. His heart is worn out from too many surgeries and medications to keep the hole in his chest closed.

They can't fix it for fear of doing nothing but speeding up the process. They're stuck with the recommendation to take him home and make him comfortable that nobody ever wants to hear, especially not now, when they're still young, supposed to be living their lives to the fullest.

He's already lived longer than they initially estimated when his body started rejecting the transplanted lung a while back, but he's sick, getting sicker all the time.

The weight he'd been able to put back on in the years following that initial hospital stay was gone again, and his lung capacity was worse every day to the point that even with the oxygen tubes he felt

breathless and dizzy, and he was coughing up blood.

Steve doesn't know what he'll do when Billy's gone. Doesn't know if he'll keep teaching, if he'll leave the area, he doesn't like to dwell on it too much.

But what he does know for sure, is that the house will never be silent, and the piano won't be covered. Won't be forgotten in that corner or left unplayed after he goes.

It will stay just where Billy left it, to commemorate him and all he'd done with it, to honor and remember his music through Steve's own.

Moments like these, fleeting as they are, are everything to Steve anymore. When Billy isn't here anymore, all he would have were the memories of mornings like these and every second together with him, sealed in a box in his heart where nobody could touch them.

To lose the person behind that, there are no words that can describe how hard that's going to be. Loss has never been easy for Steve, and having time to anticipate it did nothing but draw out the pain of knowing what was coming, what he'd have to let go of.

But it wouldn't hurt forever.

Of course he would allow himself the time to mourn, how *couldn't* he, when he'd be losing the only person who'd been able to take every wish and dream he could ever have possibly had and make them all

come true, who'd ever really loved him. But he promised Billy, and himself, that he wouldn't let himself be sad.

Because he refuses to remember him by his lows, all the countless days spent in the hospital, sleepless nights when he'd have coughing fits and be in so much pain he couldn't sleep, the teary eyed panic attacks when something triggered a bad memory. That *wasn't* Billy.

When the time comes, Steve wants to keep making music. To use the very tool he'd given Billy after government conspiracy and more than a year in the hospital, back then to offer him an outlet to feel better, to now keep his memory alive. Give him a legacy.

In the moment, Steve lets Billy wipe away his tears and pull him closer still to kiss the top of his head. He chokes back a sob listening to that wavering heartbeat from where he's drawn close, and tries to chase the thoughts away.

Because they're here *now* . Billy isn't gone yet and Steve isn't letting go. Right now, there's still time to create more moments to hold onto, to create something beautiful, melodic, *powerful*.

Steve taught Billy to play the piano, but Billy taught Steve how to live in the moment, how to care for someone with all of his heart. More than anything, Billy taught Steve how to grieve.

Notes for the Chapter:

This was really hard for me to post. From the bottom of my heart, thank you all for reading, you guys

mean everything and more to me. <3 from EJ.

Author's Note:

This is... very self indulgent, like embarrassingly so and I'm sorry for it. Part two will probably be up pretty soon! In the meantime, <3 you all!!!